

The Ko Lao Hui in Szechuan

plete record of transactions, collects a tax in place of the government.¹³ In addition, the Ko Lao Hui controls many inland communications in the sense that it operates chains of control points similar to customs houses at which merchants and other travelers are stopped for contributions.

Other, irregular sources of income are more difficult to assess. Most big stores within the territory of a branch must present gifts, in cash or in kind, either to the director or to the branch, several times each year. The amount of the contribution depends on the size of the store. Special collections occur frequently and may affect not only businessmen but also landowners, who pay a certain amount on each acre. Although stealing, robbery and kidnapping are not openly encouraged by most branches, members who have committed such crimes usually go to their director and present the branch with a large portion of their gains in return for its protection. (One can usually regain a "lost" article if one knows the right person in the branch to turn to.) Some leaders of the Ko Lao Hui capitalize on the power of the society for private and selfish ends at the expense of non-members, or even of other members, but a portion of their profits are invariably devoted to the needs of the society.¹⁴

ONE OF THE most interesting aspects of the Ko Lao Hui in Szechuan concerns the changes in its forms and activities which have taken place in recent years. Shifts in the needs and interests of communities in which the Ko Lao Hui exists have brought about changes in the motivation and spirit of the society. For example, patriotism—specifically, opposition to the Ch'ing rulers—is thought to have been the main motive for the original establishment of the Ko Lao Hui. But since the disappearance of the Ch'ings as rulers and of the Manchus as a

¹³ At one such "market" in 1945 the society branch collected CNC\$200 on each *tan* (133 pounds) of rice sold. On an average day 300 *tan* might change hands, resulting in a rake-off, on rice sales alone, of some CNC\$60,000. There are eight or nine "market" days each month.

¹⁴ An illustration of how the society looks after its own was afforded by an incident which recently occurred one morning six miles outside of Chengtu. Three cotton dealers, carrying a huge sum of money, were set upon by three highwaymen (Ko Lao Hui members acting on instructions from one of their leaders). A company of road guards, chancing to come upon the scene just after the robbers had secured their loot, started a gun fight which lasted several hours and resulted in the wounding of several guards and the death of two guards and two of the robbers. The surviving robber escaped with the money, all of which was later set aside for the future welfare of the families of the two dead members.